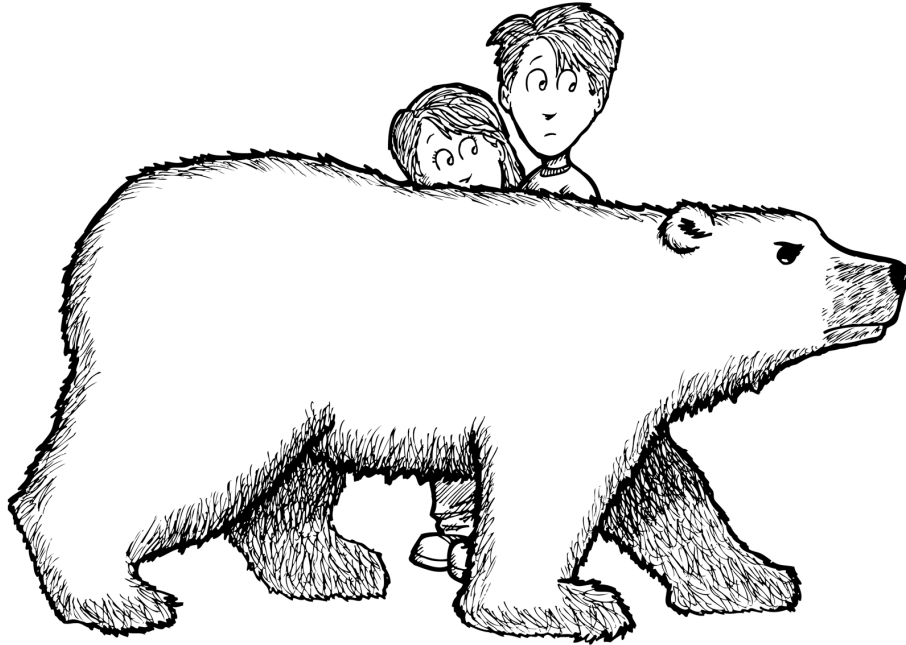




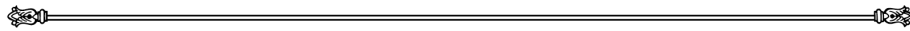
CHAPTER 9

THE MYSTERIOUS HALLS OF PING MANOR



The car that took Boyd and Cindy through Hong Kong looked like a bullet, ready to rocket them to their next space age destination. It was an effort for Ho Yin just to get Boyd and Cindy *into* the car, because both of them kept gawking at their surroundings like country-folk that had been dropped off in the big city.

Once inside, Ho Yin allowed himself to relax and they jetted down the curvy highway that wound its way along the coast of the island towards the city. As they drove towards the heart of the territory, the green landscape was occasionally interrupted by a gathering of massive high rises, the likes of which Boyd had never



seen. They were so big and tall and perfect, every line as straight as an arrow, every apartment evenly spaced. Mr. Hiller, his geometry teacher back in Frankfurter, would have loved these buildings.

"Where are we going now?" Cindy asked, her face pressed to the glass as she absorbed her surroundings.

"We're going to your new home," Ho Yin said. "Or at least, *one* of your new homes. The place we're going to now was Mr. Ping's main estate, known as Ping Manor. It's on The Peak."

"The Peak?" Boyd asked.

"The Peak is the highest point on Hong Kong Island. It's a mountain overlooking the city."

"And Mr. Ping had a mansion up there?" Cindy asked.

"Yes," Ho Yin said. "And now, *you* have a mansion up there."

Boyd and Cindy just stared at Ho Yin with their mouths wide open, both of them so jet lagged and tired that they still refused to believe this was happening. Cindy leaned over to Boyd as though there was a conspiracy afoot. "Mansion? Yeah, right," she whispered.

"What are you talking about?" Boyd asked.

"Did you see those things that attacked us in the airport?" she asked. "Do you realize there's a yeti sitting across from us? They're not taking us to a mansion."

"Then where are they taking us?" Boyd asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Some child slavery ring? The alien mothership? To be an entree in a restaurant for demons and witches? Who knows?"

"Have you gone completely bonkers?" Boyd asked.

"Panjas," she said, her eyes as big as saucers. "Shape shifters. Yetis. And this mysterious Mr. Ping fellow. We are through the looking glass, Boyd. Expect the unexpected."

"How about I expect you to shut up?" Boyd said. He was partly annoyed with his sister's paranoia and partly annoyed with his susceptibility to her paranoia. Would they be made to toil in the sweatshops of Hong Kong as child slaves, endlessly sewing cheap T-shirts to be sold in malls across North America? Were they going to the alien mothership? He didn't know the answer and didn't want to

think about it, so he tuned out his sister and resumed his fascination with his surroundings.

After winding their way on the highway alongside a train that was also making its way from the airport at a much higher speed, they began to enter the outskirts of the city. It was amazing; hundreds of buildings that looked exactly like each other, all of them tall and packed together. *Millions of people must be living here*, Boyd thought. He was sure that the entire population of Frankfurter alone could fit into some of the buildings, and he wasn't too far from the truth.

They passed through several districts, all of which had exotic and mysterious names, like Tsing Yi, Kwai Chung, and Sham Shui Po³². Finally, they came around a series of buildings and for the first time, Boyd could see the magnificence of the Hong Kong skyline rising above the horizon across the water. Giant towers extended high above the other buildings, jutting their way towards the sky. The sun was beginning to set and the city was lighting up in all of its glory; yellows and blues and silvers filling the landscape. And neon! Everywhere Boyd looked, he could see bright, neon signs advertising thousands of different products and stores, some in English, but most in Chinese.

One building, Central Plaza³³, had neon running up its sides that seemed to be changing color, parallel lines rising to the point at the top, changing from blue to purple to green to yellow over and over again. Back behind the building, he could see the darkening mountains that rose up as the sky turned orange from the artificial light of the city.

And just as quickly, it all disappeared as the limo sank into a tunnel that ran under the very ocean that lay between them and Hong Kong. Everyone sat in silence as they sped through the long tunnel, moving slower than the cars around them, most of which seemed to be boxy, European-looking red taxis with white tops.

When they emerged from the tunnel, they were deep in the canyons of downtown Hong Kong, where the world came to life in large apartment blocks and gargantuan neon advertisements that were bigger than anything Boyd had ever seen. The limo began climbing the side of the mountain, on the way to the Peak³⁴ far above and Ping

Manor. They climbed and climbed, back and forth, past giant, narrow buildings and through dense growth of tropical trees that lined the lanes, speeding along on the wrong side of the road, past crazy drivers and gated houses tucked in corners and ravines.

Occasionally, Boyd got a glimpse through the trees of the city below getting smaller, but no less dynamic. It was dark now and the orange lights of the metropolis below filled the night sky.

Mr. Ping's mansion sat at the top of Hong Kong Island, high above the city center, where things were still lush and green, but there was a bit more space to stretch out. Towards the water, things seemed to be so crammed together that the only place to build anything was straight up into the air, which most buildings did without hesitation. The higher up they went, the more private gates were visible, little compounds hidden behind fences of exclusivity, places the ultra-rich called home.

As they rounded the last corner, they came to a large, ten foot high stone gate that surrounded what looked to be a very prestigious house overlooking the city. "This is it," Ho Yin said.

"Thank the stars," Reggie said. "It will be quite pleasant to sleep in my own bed tonight."

"This is it?" Boyd asked, as the large, iron gates of the front entrance opened to let the limousine inside.

"This is where you're going to live," Ho Yin said.

The gates shut behind them and they drove through a series of large, tropical trees that lined a long, straight driveway and opened onto a rather large (by Hong Kong standards) front yard with a circular driveway. At the far end of the yard stood a massive, old mansion. It was straight out of a fairy tale and seemed to be perfectly suited for a king or queen. It was long, its two stories stretched from end to end of the property, and its walls were made of elegant stonework. There was a large, marble fountain in the front yard that they circled around, and the limousine made its way to the staircase leading to the large, mahogany front doors.

Boyd and Cindy were speechless as they stepped from the limousine, looking up at the glory of the place they were now going to call home.

"This is *ours*?" Cindy asked.

"Oh, yes," Ho Yin said.

"And this isn't one of those cruel television shows where they bring out cameras and say, 'Suckers!' is it?" she asked.

"No," Ho Yin said.

"This isn't one of those awful dreams where we'll get inside, fall asleep and then have our mom wake us up, saying, 'You're late for school!'"

"No," Ho Yin said.

"And you're not some evil demon who will..."

"Cripes, old girl," Reggie said, throwing up his arms in exasperation. "It's as real as I am! Get with the program!"

Cindy looked at Reggie and said, "I'm still debating whether *you're* real."

They walked up the front step and into the grand foyer of the mansion. From the front door, they could see down the main hallway, all the way to the other side of the house. It was at least fifty yards from one end to the other, practically as big as the entire block that Boyd and Cindy had lived on in Frankfurter. The interior of the mansion was filled with dark wood that was carved with elaborate patterns one might find in Buckingham Palace, and polished floors so clean that their reflections were mirror perfect.

On the left side of the foyer was a coat closet and on the right side was a giant, stuffed polar bear on a pedestal placed in a small alcove. The bear was frozen in time with a snarl on its face and its paws raised to strike its victim. Ho Yin looked up at the polar bear and said, "Okay, Bjorn, you're relieved."

The polar bear lowered its paws and looked down at everyone. It plopped down on the pedestal, sitting with its large legs dangling off the sides under its round belly. "Jolly good job you've done while we were gone, Bjorn," Reggie said, setting the luggage down in the hall. "We still on for that chess game later?"

The polar bear grunted, which seemed to indicate that he was, indeed, ready for that game. He lumbered off the pedestal and down on all fours. This massive creature, who was apparently named Bjorn, walked from Boyd to Cindy and back to Boyd again, sniffing at both of them and issuing a few grunts in the process, all while Ho Yin and Reggie took off their coats and hung them in the closet.

Boyd didn't know whether he should treat Bjorn like a giant puppy or like the threatening creature he was. "Does he bite?" he asked. Bjorn huffed his terrible bear-breath in his face as a response.

"Only when he's hungry," Ho Yin said. "Are you hungry, Bjorn?"

Bjorn huffed at them, again, to signal yes, and then padded around the corner and out of sight.

"That was a polar bear!" Cindy whispered into Boyd's ear. She was as excited as Boyd had ever seen her.

The interior of the mansion was like a trip back in time. It looked like an old school adventurer's club, with strange and unusual artifacts from around the globe adorning every available space. There was a wide assortment of voodoo masks that looked as if they were from the deepest, darkest recesses of Africa, where only hearty souls dared to travel. There were strange helmets encased in glass and a large, Egyptian casket cast in solid gold. There were bizarre weapons hanging on the walls. There were odd and unusual paintings of macabre people and scenes that seemed to add to the weird atmosphere. Because it was night time, the mansion seemed dark and creepy, as if there were things inside that no one dared to talk about, a feeling perpetuated by the collection of alien-looking insects under glass in a display case in the living room and the shrunken heads that were kept in formaldehyde jars in the study.

"Here's your room, Cindy," Ho Yin said, opening the door to a cavernous suite with a large, four-poster bed in the center. The décor was opulent, but the problem was that the room was just as creepy, if not more, as the rest of the house.

"Uh-uh," Cindy said between yawns. "No way. Not a chance on Earth."

“What are you talking about?” Boyd asked. “Just get in your room.”

“Are you kidding me?” Cindy asked. “Look at this room! It's *haunted*, for crying out loud.”

“What?” Boyd asked.

“Look at it,” she said, throwing her bags on the floor and walking around the space. “Over there in the corner, where that nice chest sits? That's where the ax murder happened. And over there? Behind those window curtains? That's where the masked madman hides before he comes out to kill me. And that chest at the foot of the bed? That's where the body parts are kept.”

“I think you've watched too many of those detective shows on that idiot box people call a television,” Reggie said, leading her to the bed and pulling the blankets up to her chin.

“But I'm telling you,” Cindy said, trying to protest. Her efforts were futile, as sleep was beginning to overtake her. “This room has bad karma.”

“Actually, this room has some of the best karma in the joint,” Reggie said, smiling at her.

“But...” she said as her eyes closed. “Ax murderers. Body parts.”

“Rubbish,” Reggie said, but before the last syllable came out of her mouth, Cindy was fast asleep.

Once they were back out in the hall, Reggie and Ho Yin led Boyd to his room next door. “She's got quite an imagination on her,” Ho Yin said.

“Yeah,” Boyd said, sucking in a massive yawn. “Mom lets her read anything she wants. She's weird.”

“She's certainly unique,” Reggie said.

“Ho Yin,” Boyd said, “what about Mom and Dad? Shouldn't we be out there looking for them?”

“There's not a lot we can do this late, Boyd,” Ho Yin said. “Besides, I think we all need to get some rest.”

Boyd's room was large and dark, with a giant, four-poster bed in the middle and a grandfather clock ticking away on the far wall. The biggest fireplace he'd ever seen took up one entire side of the

room. The room felt safe, even if it was a bit drafty, and the bed looked to be the most comfortable Boyd had ever seen.

"Get some rest, Boyd," Ho Yin said, walking towards the door. "Tomorrow is going to be a very busy day for you."

"Okay," Boyd said, already drifting.

"Oh, and I should warn you," he added, popping back into the room right before he shut the door. "Ignore the clock."

"What do you mean?" Boyd asked.

"It didn't want to move, so it's been a bit belligerent," he said.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," he said. "Just remember. Ignore it. Good night."

Boyd was just too tired to try to figure out what Ho Yin was saying, and with record speed, he fell asleep on the immense, overstuffed, soft pillows. He was so tired, in fact, that he failed to hear the clock mutter something as he drifted off, thinking it was but a dream. If he hadn't been so tired, he would have heard it say, "Spoiled runt!" in a thick, British accent that was unmistakably belligerent.

Exactly two hours after he fell asleep, Boyd was awoken by a poke at his side. Actually, it was several pokes to his side, as it took Cindy a fair number of jabs to rouse her deeply sleeping brother. "Wake up, you dimwit!" she hissed as she thrust her fingers into his ribs. It had always been difficult to wake Boyd, no matter how tired he was.

"What do you want?" Boyd asked, blinking hundreds of times as he made out his sister's silhouette in the darkness.

"I need you," she said. It was the first time Cindy had ever said anything like that to him. However, Boyd was much too tired to appreciate the significance of the moment.

"Go to bed," he said, turning away from her. "I'm sleeping."

She poked him in the ribs again, only this time much harder.

"Wake up!"

"Argh!" Boyd said, throwing his blankets off his body. "What is it?"

"I need your help," Cindy whispered.

"With what?" Boyd asked, exasperated with his sister.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

Boyd couldn't believe that those words had just come from his sister's mouth. "Well, get a glass of water," he said.

"There's no glass in my room," she said. "And I don't know where the kitchen is."

"Well, look for it," Boyd said.

"I'm scared to walk around here by myself," she said. "This place gives me the creeps."

As much as he hated to admit it, Ping Manor gave Boyd the creeps, too. He wasn't completely sure that he would be brave enough to go looking for water by himself in the middle of the night either. "Do you really want me to go?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, pulling him out of bed.

"All right, all right," he said, dragging himself to his feet.

Ping Manor was silent and dark, with only a few stray, dim lamps illuminating its vast hallways. The darkness of the Manor made the strange and unusual displays all the more ominous as they walked down the large staircase at the front, down onto the main floor. Boyd pretended to be brave, leading the way as he padded barefoot across the cold, wooden floor, while Cindy kept a tight clutch on his arm, never straying too far from his side.

All the doors on the lower level of the mansion were shut, forcing Boyd and Cindy to go through the hair-raising process of opening each one as they held their breath in fear of what horrors might lay behind them. Some of the doors were innocuous, leading to small bedrooms or closets, but others were creepy. In one particular instance, they opened the door to the large dining room and the blue light from the tall, open windows, coupled with the stillness of the room and the Victorian furniture, gave it a haunted quality and they couldn't shut the door fast enough.

"I don't know if I'm going to like living here," Cindy said.

"Well, I certainly won't like living here if you keep dragging me out of bed just to get you water every night," Boyd said.

“Oh, I'd like to see you walk around here at night by yourself, chicken,” she said. “You're just as creeped out as I am.”

All of a sudden, Boyd froze in his tracks and peered into the darkness down the hallway. “What's that?” he said. His voice was filled with worry.

“What's *what*?” Cindy asked, tensing her body.

“*That*,” Boyd said, still staring, wide-eyed into the darkness.

“What?” Cindy asked. “What do you see? What is it?” She was starting to panic.

Filled with fear, Boyd said, “I think it's...it's...nothing.” He began to laugh and slap his knee as if he was the funniest kid on the planet.

“You're a jerk,” Cindy said, hitting him on the arm.

“Here's the kitchen,” Boyd said, opening the last door and flipping on the light.

The kitchen was large, but homey, with gleaming silver pots and pans hanging from the walls, and large ovens and sinks that looked big enough to feed hundreds of guests. Boyd walked around the room, surveying the wide variety of cooking utensils as Cindy got her water.

“What do you think of this place?” Boyd asked, examining a strange, multi-armed machine whose purpose he couldn't discern.

“I think it's creepy,” she said. “I think that yeti is weird. I think my bed is lumpy. I want to go back home.”

“Well, don't mince words, Cindy,” Boyd said, being sarcastic. “Tell me how you *really* feel.”

“Do you really think this place is ours?” Cindy asked. “I mean, this mansion and everything?”

“I guess.”

“I wish mom was here,” she said. She looked at the clock on the wall and sighed. “If we were at home right now, we'd be at school eating lunch.”

Boyd looked at the clock and realized Cindy was right. “Yeah,” he said, trailing off.

“Just think,” she said, “two days ago at this time, you were about to get in a fight with Tucker.”

“Yeah,” Boyd said, feeling reluctant to dredge up those memories.

“Why did you do that, Boyd?” Cindy asked.

“Do what?”

“Stand up to Tucker,” she said. “I don't know of anybody who ever did something like that. Why did you do it?”

“Because I hate bullies,” he said. “And he's a bully. He picks on everybody in school and someone needs to say something.”

“But he was going to beat you up,” she said.

“Yeah,” Boyd said, “But big deal. Nobody should have to be afraid all the time and Tucker made it so that everyone was always scared of him. I was just tired of being afraid.”

“The Dalai Lama says that to conquer your fears, you must face them every day,” Cindy said, looking off into the distance.

“What did you just say?” Boyd asked. “The Dolly-who?”

Cindy snapped out of her tiny trance and said, “Nothing. I'm going back to bed.”

Sometimes Cindy could be quite strange and this was one of those moments, so Boyd just shrugged his shoulders and followed her out the door. The minute he walked outside, he froze. His eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped open as he stood there, filled with fear.

Cindy continued talking but then noticed that Boyd was no longer following her. She turned and stared at him, her hands on her hips. “Are you trying to scare me again?” she asked. “I can't believe you'd try the same trick again. You're such an idiot.”

“Cindy,” Boyd said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Behind you.”

“Shut up!” Cindy said, full of anger. “You're such a jerk! I'm going to bed.” She turned back towards the stairs, whereupon she ran smack dab into the very thing that had paralyzed Boyd with fear. Cindy looked up to see that she'd run into a person, but not your average, every day person. Standing before her was a dusty, decrepit, raggedy, zombie-like individual that was more of a rotting corpse than anything else. Everything suddenly clicked in her mind and she realized that she was standing in front of a mummy.

“EEEEEEEEEE!”

Cindy's high-pitched scream at the sight of the mummy could have shattered glass and she had every reason to be frightened at the skeletal remains that stood in front of her. What made things worse was the fact that her scream seemed to enrage the mummy. It began to flail its arms back and forth and emit a low, raspy moan that sounded like it was out for blood.

It seemed that Cindy could have stood there and screamed for fifteen minutes straight had Boyd not pulled her away from the creature. They backed away, but the mummy was now walking towards them, howling in its frightening way, staggering along on its brittle legs.

"What *is* that?" Cindy yelled as they slowly backed down the hall.

"You tell me," Boyd said, starting to panic.

They had backed themselves into a corner and the mummy was slowly making its way toward them. Cindy squeezed her eyes shut in terror, but Boyd couldn't look away in terrified awe at what was in front of him. *This is how I'm going to die*, he thought. *Eaten raw by a mummy.*

"What in the blue blazes is going on down here?"

Boyd and Cindy looked over to see Reggie standing in the hallway in a silk robe, his hands on his hips as if he were perturbed. "Help!" Boyd said, for the mummy was now but inches from them.

"My goodness, lad, you've frightened poor Rama right out of his wits," Reggie said. He walked over to the mummy and put a reassuring arm around its shoulder. "There, there, old chap," he said to the mummy. "It's just the guests, mate. No need to get yourself in a tizzy."

The mummy seemed to be grunting and moaning something as Reggie turned it back down the hall in the opposite direction. Its hands jerked toward Boyd and Cindy as if it was speaking about them. "Yes, yes," Reggie said, sounding as if he was comforting the creature. "They meant no harm. You really can't blame them, can you? You look a fright."

Reggie motioned for Boyd and Cindy to follow as he led the mummy around the corner, towards the giant Egyptian coffin that they'd seen earlier. The coffin door was wide open as he directed the mummy back inside with a calm hand.

"I completely understand," Reggie said as the mummy continued to moan and grunt while it got back in the coffin. "You don't need to be wandering around like that anyway. You need your rest. Get some sleep, old bean."

Reggie closed the heavy coffin door with a quiet thud and slapped his large hands together to get rid of the dust that the mummy's rags had left on him. He turned to Boyd and Cindy and said, "Why in the world would you want to get Rama all stirred up like that?"

"It tried to *kill* us," Cindy said.

"Rama?" Reggie asked with a laugh. "Please! Rama wouldn't hurt a fly. For goodness' sake, he's a *mummy*. If you even *breathe* on him too hard, he'll fall apart. Believe me, I know. I've had to put him back together before."

"Why was there a mummy walking around the house?" Boyd asked as Reggie led them back upstairs to their bedrooms.

"Well, when you've been in a gold coffin for three-thousand years, you need a little excitement," Reggie said. "He probably heard the two of you thumping around down here and wanted to see what the action was."

"He tried to kill us," Cindy said, still traumatized.

Reggie knelt down beside her to look her in the eye when they reached her door. "Look, old girl," he said, "nothing's going to hurt you on Reggie's watch, okay? Especially old chaps like Rama. You just go on in there and get some rest."

"But..."

"None of that," Reggie said. "Get some sleep."

Reggie left Cindy standing in the middle of her room, speechless, as he shut the door and turned towards Boyd. "Well, now that we've settled Miss Candycakes in her room, I'm off to bed. Goodnight, old bean."



“You're not gonna walk me to *my* room?” Boyd asked, still frightened.

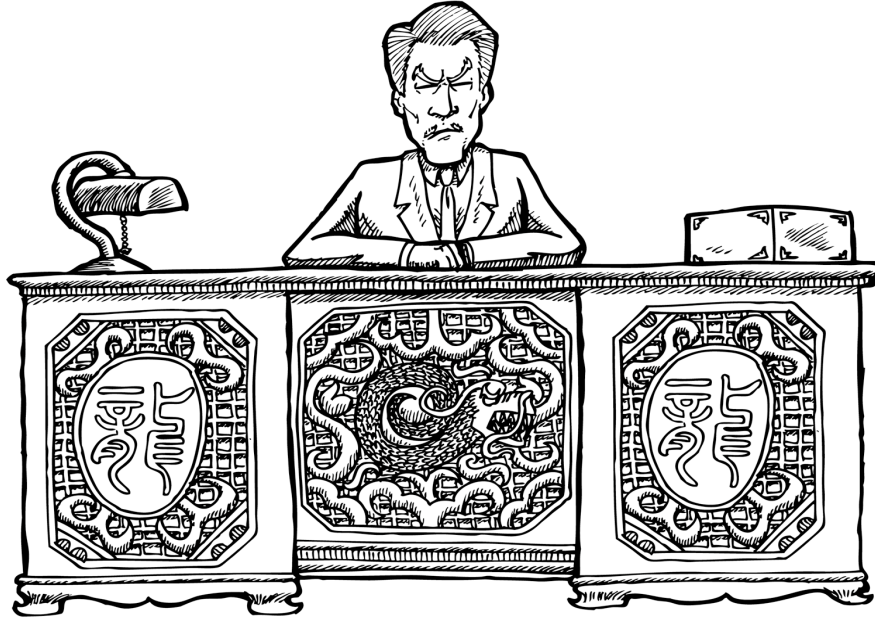
Reggie began to laugh, slapping his knee as if Boyd had just told a good joke. “That's funny,” he said. “You've got a great sense of humor, Boyd. See you in the morning.”

Boyd wasn't kidding. He really wanted the safety of Reggie's company. After Reggie had disappeared back down the stairs, Boyd made it back to his room and dove under the blankets, pulling them up to his nose to keep the bad things away.

It would take him a while to fall asleep.



CHAPTER 10



THE EGREGIOUS MR. PU

Sitting on the fourth floor of a nondescript office building in Wan Chai was an establishment well-known throughout Hong Kong called *Mr. Pu's Auction House*³⁵. It was there that Mr. Fang, Mrs. Fang, and Li pulled up in a large, silver car, followed by three more cars containing Mr. Fang's bodyguards. Mr. Fang already had a healthy sweat covering his body from the humidity of the Hong Kong evening, but with the stress of failing to capture Boyd McCloyd and his impending debt to the Conspiricetti, his clothes were virtually soaked as he struggled to get his fat body out of the back of his car.

"Can I help you out, sir?" Li asked, offering him a hand.

Mr. Fang slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me, dog," he said between pants as he pulled himself to his feet. "You've caused enough problems already."

“Honey, do you want me to run home and make you some noodles before we see Pu?” Mrs. Fang asked.

“No, no, I want to get this over with,” Mr. Fang said.

Mr. Pu's Auction House was the premier auction house in all of Hong Kong, selling luxury goods to the highest bidders from all over the world. From gold-plated toasters to leopard skin toilet brushes, Mr. Pu's Auction House sold items only for the wealthy and extravagant; nothing was too gaudy, nothing too ridiculous, and as long as it was worth a small fortune, it was up for sale.

The place was run by the ever-charming Mr. Pu³⁶. Mr. Pu was a local celebrity in Hong Kong, known for his expensive parties, garish clothes, and lavish home. Mr. Pu prided himself on having one of the finest antiques collections in all of Asia, acquired by one of the finest businesses in all of Asia, and housed in one of the finest mansions in all of Asia. Mr. Pu's Auction House was an invitation-only affair.

Mr. Pu, himself, was a slight, older man with salt and pepper hair and black-rimmed glasses an inch thick. He was quite short and very well groomed, his hair always neatly slicked back to the side and his colorful suits without a wrinkle in sight. He looked harmless enough, but one was not to judge Mr. Pu by his looks.

“Mr. Fang,” Mr. Pu said, meeting the entourage at the door. “What a pleasure it is to have you here.”

Mr. Fang was breathing heavily as he walked into Mr. Pu's office. It was filled with paintings and antique lamps and regal chairs, and probably contained more treasures than was found in most world-renowned museums. “Good to see you, Pu,” Mr. Fang said between huffs.

“I hope you don't mind if I avoid shaking your puffy, sweat-soaked hand,” Mr. Pu said.

“Not at all,” Mr. Fang said, surveying the room. “Where shall I sit?”

“Just one second,” Mr. Pu said, and he turned to the open door. “Charles?”

“Yes, Mr. Pu?” said a man peeking in the door.

“Charles could you please drape a towel over the chair here?” Mr. Pu asked. “I'd like to avoid Mr. Fang's sweat staining my antique chairs.” Charles disappeared and quickly returned, draping a towel over the chair as Mr. Fang sat. Mrs. Fang sat beside him and Li hovered in the background. “Now, Mr. Fang, what might I do for you?”

“Look, I've got a problem,” Mr. Fang said, pulling a dumpling from a cloth in his pocket and stuffing it into his mouth. “A big problem. I think you can help.”

“I'm all ears,” Mr. Pu said, settling in behind the ornate Chinese desk between them.

Mr. Fang gave Mr. Pu a deliciously evil grin and said, “Who do you hate most in the world?”

“Excuse me?” Mr. Pu asked.

“I asked you who you hate most in the world,” Mr. Fang said. “It's an easy question.”

Mr. Pu laughed graciously and said, “I don't know what you're getting at, Mr. Fang, but I don't hate anyone.”

“Oh really?” Mr. Fang said. “I think you're lying.”

“Mr. Fang, what in the world are you talking about?”

With great effort, Mr. Fang rose to his feet and began to wander about the room, observing the antiques on display. He wandered over to a beautifully sculpted jade dragon sitting on a glass shelf on the far side of the office. “You have a very nice collection here, Mr. Pu,” he said. “These antiques must be very valuable.”

“It's the finest collection in the world,” Mr. Pu said, his face full of pride.

“The finest?” Mr. Fang asked. “Oh, Mr. Pu, this isn't the finest. *Confucius Ping* has the finest antique collection in the world.”

A tick began to form in Mr. Pu's eye and his face grew dark. “Mr. Fang, I assure you that this collection is...”

“...is second place to Mr. Ping's,” Mr. Fang said. “You know, I think you've got nice antiques, but they're only so-so compared to Mr. Ping.”

“Well, I'm sure Mr. Ping...”

"In fact, Mr. Ping makes you look like a second-rate junk store owner," Mr. Fang laughed.

"Shut up!" Mr. Pu yelled, his eyes seething with anger behind his thick glasses. His fists shook with rage. "That *fraud!* That *phony!* Confucius Ping is a two-bit, illiterate fool! His collection is *nothing* compared to mine. *Nothing!*"

"Calm down, Mr. Pu," Mr. Fang said, laughing at him.

"Calm down?" Mr. Pu asked. "You insult my life's collection by comparing it to that hack, Confucius Ping? That man has made a mockery of the antique business!"

"So you *do* hate somebody?" Mr. Fang asked.

"I do," Mr. Pu said. "I hate him with *every fiber of my being.*"

"How *dare* you talk about a dead man like that," Mr. Fang said, smiling.

Mr. Pu froze in his tracks. He looked up at Mr. Fang with shock in his eyes. "He's dead?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, yes," Mr. Fang said. "Just the other day."

"My goodness," Mr. Pu said, almost to himself. "How I've *waited* for this day to come. What a joyous, wonderful, exciting day."

"And guess who has his things," Mr. Fang said.

"You?" Mr. Pu asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," Mr. Fang said. "I've got his house, his land, and all those stupid little things he's got on display. I've got it *all.*"

Mr. Pu looked like he was about to have a heart attack. "You've inherited Mr. Ping's collection?"

"Oh, yes," Mr. Fang said. "It's mine...as soon as I take care of one, little thing."

"What do you mean?"

Mr. Fang smacked his fist into his hand and stared out the window. "There's this thirteen-year old kid named Boyd McCloyd. This child says it's his. He won't give it to me."

"I don't understand," Mr. Pu said.

"Look, let me say this," Mr. Fang said, sitting down again. "I told some people I was going to give them Boyd McCloyd, but then I got the wrong person. It's very complicated."



"Well, how do *I* fit into all of this?" Mr. Pu asked.

"Here's the deal," Mr. Fang said. "I need to know what the most valuable thing in Mr. Ping's collection of antiques is. I'm gonna hold this kid's parents ransom until he gives me something worth as much as him. So what I want *you* to do is tell me what is the most valuable thing Mr. Ping has. Then, I'll make that kid give it to me."

"What's in it for me?" Mr. Pu asked.

"If you come up with something valuable for me to ransom...something really valuable...I'll give you everything else in his house."

"Why would you come to me?" Mr. Pu asked. "Why not Lu's Antiques? Or Xu's Sales of Fine Goods?"

"Because I *know* you," Mr. Fang said. "And I know how much you *hate* Mr. Ping. You don't like him, right?"

"Not like him?" Mr. Pu asked. "Why would I not like him? He only stole countless artifacts, gold, jewels, and ancient treasures out from under me all of my life. He only made me look like an utter and complete fool every chance he got. He only kept me from having the most incredible collection of antiquities and artifacts in the world. Not like him? Oh, no, Mr. Fang. I *hate* him. I hate him with every fiber of my being and I wish a pox on his soul and every soul that has anything to do with him."

"So are you going to help me?" Mr. Fang asked.

"You want something of immeasurable value from Mr. Ping's collection?" Mr. Pu asked, rubbing his hands together with glee. "Mr. Fang, I know just the thing."

